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Ephesians: How Not to Lose Heart

Ephesians 3:13-21

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Paul begins this important section that ends chapter 3 with a telling admission to his hearers, that it would be very possible for someone to be discouraged about Paul's situation, under house arrest in Rome. In fact, since I think of Paul's letters as one end of a two-way telephone conversation, as if we are in the kitchen listening to Mom speaking on the phone with someone, trying to figure out what the person on the other end of the line is saying through Mom's comments and responses, it seems to me that it was the Ephesians who had lost heart. The believers in the church in Ephesus, which Paul and others had founded, were deeply distraught over the fact that the apostle, their primary mentor, was under house arrest, and unable to come to them to continue his teaching and encouragement. They would have reasoned that they were simply a new church with a new understanding of God, and though they had joy and were growing as a local church, this situation with Paul brought them a despondency. In these verses, Paul embraces their disheartenment with a deep and profound wisdom.

And the reason I think we need to pay very close attention to what Paul says to the Ephesians is that many of us lose heart as well. We may despair over the difficulties of life, or the way problems pile on top of other problems. We engage so many issues that lead us to take a step back, to pause, to want to give up. Paul's counsel to the Ephesians is Paul's counsel to CPC.

Paul lays out seven steps, a staircase of sorts, to the fullest possible experience of Christ-centered vitality. Let's look at each.

First, Paul says he 'bows his knees before the Father.' This is prayer. As I have often said, the first work of ministry is prayer. The first step up the staircase is prayer. Now, you need to understand that the Jews of the day, the religious Jews, typically prayed standing with arms outstretched to God. It was only when something was of deep, intense concern that they bowed the knees or prostrated themselves before God, and that is the position Paul takes here. Of course, it isn't your physical position or physical posture that's what is really important here - I hope we all understand that. It's the reverence we bring to the task, the acknowledgment that God is God and that only through God can our life have meaning, that is behind our bowing.

In bowing before the Father, Paul is asking God to reveal his glory, to bring forth the 'riches of his glory' (verse 16). Which is to say, we are not praying to some cold, distant, adolescent being sitting on some remote Mt. Olympus somewhere, flapping his eyelids in contemptuous indifference to your needs. You are coming to a tender, concerned, loving Father, who is deeply involved with you, who wants you to grow, who is concerned about your welfare, and who will not leave you in some state of arrested development. So the first step, even when we are feeling low and feeling despondent, is to remember to come to God in prayer.

The second step up the staircase is that we be 'strengthened with power through his Spirit in our inner being' (verse 16b). The idea here is not so much that the Spirit dwells in us as that the Spirit might infuse his own strength into our inner being.

What's our inner being? Well, we know about our outer being, right? We dress the outer part of ourselves, we feed it, comb it, we pat it, primp it, wash it, dry it, smear it with cream. We are always concerned with the 'outer man' - the body and its needs. But we are also aware that there is an inner man, an inner being.

Now, when I speak about the inner man or the inner being, I am not talking about our intellect. I had lunch some time ago with a man a bit older than me. At the end of the meal I paid the bill by giving the waiter some cash. The waiter took the money and brought back some change. To my astonishment, my friend helped himself to the change and put it into his pocket. Well, that's being absent minded! But that's not the inner man or our inner being. The inner man here is the human spirit. And it's just here, in our human spirit, that God begins the work of recovery. It's here, in our inner human spirit, that we become profoundly discouraged, broken hearted, the place where we give up. So it is just here, in this inner spirit we all have, where our loving Father gives us a fresh infusion of his Spirit into our spirit. We are strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man, our inner being.

And I want to be clear that at this stage, at this step up the staircase, it's not about feeling better. That can be a real problem in spiritual recovery, the demand for some instant sense of relief. At this point, at this step, we may get nothing more than some consciousness of reassurance that things are going to work out eventually.

And, frankly, it's important to remember that most of this is God's responsibility. You don't have to start all this happening. God starts it. All that is necessary is that you ask him for it. You begin with prayer. The way to start is to pray, to ask God to grant you that your spirit will receive a new infusion of strength, that you can drink again of the river of the Spirit of life which is in you, and that your spirit will be restored so that you can begin to operate as God intended. You won't feel this necessarily.

This moves us then to the third step on the staircase, which immediately follows: 'that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith' (verse 17). We are strengthened by his Spirit so that Christ may literally 'make his home' in our heart. You see how this goes from step to step? The strengthening of our spirit results in our sensing the personal presence of the Lord Jesus, as our reborn faith takes hold of his promise once again. Why have we been languishing? It's because our faith is dragging. What the infusion of the Spirit does is to awaken faith, so that we can begin to believe again. And the first thing to believe is the most fundamental fact of Christian life - that Jesus has come to live in you.

Yet, even here on the third step, there may not be much feeling involved. It is just a *fact* that faith again rests upon Jesus' promise to be with us. Faith is awakened now and we remind ourselves that Jesus Christ lives in us. I am a believer, you can say. Christ has taken up residence in me, you can declare. He will not leave me. He is at home in my heart. I belong to him. I knew these things but in my despair I forgot them, but now, in my prayer, in my inner being, faith has reawakened in me, and now I remember these realities as present with me right now.

This then leads us to the fourth step, that 'you are rooted and established (grounded) in love.' This is the place where feeling begins to return to us! Once again we are beginning to feel something, but as you see, it's the fourth step, not the first step, when sensation comes back. Reassured by Jesus' promise to be with you, you know you are now loved, and that he cares for you, and that he will not change that relationship. Therefore, your self-identity returns. Paul mixes his metaphors. Plants are rooted - buildings are established or grounded. But Paul ties them together as beautiful figures of security. A plant that is

rooted is solid. We have planted trees out in the hinterlands of Brown's Valley, but we had to tie them down so they couldn't move until the roots took hold. Now, we have removed the wires and stakes and you can push the trees but now they won't move. This is the concept of being rooted and established.

Paul is simply saying here that we need foundations for our experiences. We can't handle life unless we have a solid foundation, unless we are rooted and grounded - in what? In love - in the assurance that God loves us, and has accepted us, that we are dear to him, precious to him. When we know this, then we know who we are. Then we have a sense of well-being. Love always gives us that. That's why a lonely, solitary life is so difficult - because there is no sense of well-being. That's the greatest cause of suicide in our world . What causes people to jump off bridges and blow out their brains? They don't feel loved. No one appreciates them. No one reaches out to them. But the Christian can find his or her ground of solidarity and security and love in Jesus Christ. That's the fourth step.

When you get there, you are ready for the fifth step, 'that you may have the power to grasp together with other believers (saints).' You see, it's our sense of identity that gives us the power to relate to others. We begin to see, in the midst of our lessening despondency, that we are not to live in isolation but to be together with other believers. Many Christians try to live in solitary confinement. They resist relating, resist sharing. But that's falling into the trap in which the world lives. The world talks a lot about privacy, longs for privacy, struggles to have areas of life that no one sees. But the price of that is loneliness. And if loneliness is your trouble, it's because you are insisting upon being private. The church cuts right across this.

Christ-centered teaching and doctrine undermines this philosophy of privacy, because it tells us we are not to be private. We are to relate, we are to share. We are to be open. We are to 'widen our hearts' (2 Corinthians 6); we are to 'bear one another's burdens' (Galatians 6); we are to 'confess our faults to one another' (James 5). The Christian is to have no private areas in his life at all. If he insists upon it, he is defying what God has called him to - the sharing of the body of Christ in openness and freedom for all to see exactly what you are. And as you begin to relate to and to share with one another, then, Paul says, you begin to realize, to lay hold of, the height and depth and length and breadth of love and faith and the community of believers.

This is precisely one of my great concerns as a pastor. Congregations can easily become barren and poverty stricken, narrow and insular and isolated. We love to come to services and just sit and listen or watch the show of the week but not relate to anyone else. This is why I speak so often of the gifts of the Spirit and urge people into small groups or into Bible studies or into mission or into personal evangelism - it's in reaching out that you become part of the 'together with all the saints' and it's when we are together, supporting one another, that we begin to lay hold of the great provisions in Jesus Christ - the wideness, the length, the height, the depth, of his love.

Which leads to the sixth step - to 'know this love which surpasses knowledge.' Here is where feeling comes in full throttle. Here you can really begin to glow with this understanding of the love of Christ. We begin to see the love of Christ in everything that happens to us - in our circumstances, in the world of nature around, in relationships, in life itself. We are simply overwhelmed with the sense of love of Jesus Christ.

And then we reach the final, seventh, step on the staircase, that 'we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.' This is the purpose of our creation. He made us to be vessels wholly filled and flooded with God himself, display cases for his glory. This isn't a condition to which we attain only once or twice in our Christian life, but a condition to which we are to

return again and again. This is what Paula refers to as being filled with the Spirit. It is the condition in which God is in possession and control of our lives, enriching us, blessing us, strengthening us. Our faith is strong and vital, and we are reaching out, ministering. We become conscious of how we are God's workmanship, and of the good works to which we have been foreordained.

These are the seven steps from the place of loss of heart to the place where we are involved in ministering in the power the Spirit and bringing glory to Jesus Christ. I pray you will be encouraged by them!

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